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We the Students: Surveying Spaces and Envisioning the Future

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CHAPTER 25

We the Students:
Surveying Spaces and Envisioning
the Future

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To apprehend the panoply of spaces that house honors on a national scale requires input from administrators and faculty. Nevertheless, one of the most important and often overlooked perspectives is that of honors students themselves. Admittedly, students are transient. After four or five years, most complete their undergraduate degrees, leaving their campuses, clubs, and honors programs behind after graduation. Despite their relatively brief time on campus, however, no one has more firsthand experience concerning housing honors students than honors students themselves, and some current honors students will certainly become honors

administrators and faculty in the future. In the fall of 2012, honors students were given the opportunity to respond to a three-question survey about housing. The survey collected the opinions of current honors students regarding what they liked or did not like about their current honors spaces and what they imagined honors structures and spaces might be in the future. The survey was distributed to the National Collegiate Honors Council listserv; approximately 300 students responded. The survey was not intended to gather statistically relevant data; its purpose was to add student voices to this ongoing conversation.

After first obtaining approval to disseminate this survey from the Institutional Review Board for the Study of Human Subjects at Eastern Kentucky University, we forwarded a link to the survey on SurveyMonkey to the NCHC listserv. Directors were asked to forward this link to their students, and the students were then asked to answer, providing as much detail and commentary as they wished, the following three questions:

- If there were one thing that you could change today about your current honors structures, what would it be? Budget should NOT be a factor in your response.
- What kind of spaces, structures, and buildings do you think honors programs and colleges will occupy thirty years from now, or roughly when your children might be in them?
- What spaces or structures, if any, do you think honors will occupy one hundred years from now?

The first question allowed students to candidly weigh in on the current state of their honors spaces. Responses varied widely. Many students desired larger spaces, both common shared space and space for student housing, while others called for the replacement of traditional dorm rooms with apartment-style suites. A few voiced a desire for greener living spaces. Some respondents demanded better access to computers, printers, and Wi-Fi. Many students noted that their honors programs inhabited the oldest buildings on campus and, in light of this, asked for renovation of the current spaces or construction of new spaces. The desire for honors

spaces that encourage community was a common thread. One student noted, "I would make the central commons larger. . . . This would give students from throughout the program the opportunity for more exposure to each other. From my experience, the best benefit of the program is interaction with other honors students." Along the same lines, another student observed, "It would be nice to have more space to relax and enjoy the company of fellow honors students." Respondents were divided, however, on the issue of separation: whether honors programs should house their students in strictly honors spaces or whether honors students and non-honors students should be housed together. Of those who addressed this issue, most argued that honors housing should exclude non-honors students. One student went so far as to say, "We need more spacious and better furnishings. We are the highest-achieving students at the university, and the administration should want us to be more comfortable so we stay." Another commented, "I would like a more modern space. We are the top group of the university's students, and we get the oldest building on campus. If they gave us any other building, we would make that building look twenty times better." These two responses represent the views of several other students; comments like these, however, convey a sense of entitlement and elitism that we feel honors programs should guard against.

Responses to the second question, which asked students to speculate about honors spaces and structures 30 years into the future, were also mixed. Some were pessimistic; one student, for example, drearily replied that the honors program will still inhabit "the smallest building on campus." Generally, students' responses to this question indicate that the buildings and structures of honors will be much the same in 30 years but more energy efficient and eco-friendly. Many students communicated a desire for their honors program to have full control of its own residence halls and buildings on campus, while some went a step further by imagining their honors program as a separate campus entirely. These respondents envisioned a space apart from non-honors students where, as one respondent imagined, honors students will "live in tightknit communities, cooking, learning, and doing everything together."

Another said, "I think honors colleges will have their own buildings on campus, completely separate from the campus structure." Not every student, however, went this far:

In all honesty, I prefer to have my classes integrated with the rest of the college community so that the honors program isn't set aside by the rest of the university, but rather integrated with the university. We are already set aside too much in my opinion.

Others imagined that honors students would live among non-honors students but they would enjoy specialized honors-only spaces such as science labs, greenhouses, and art or music studios.

Having students speculate about honors spaces 100 years into the future was the objective of the last question. When answering the previous two questions, a handful of students mentioned a desire for more environmentally conscious living within honors programs; evidently, most students did not feel that greener living would be feasible in the present day, or even in 30 years. When answering the final question, however, the students did imagine a future in which greener living would be a priority. Additionally, many respondents envisioned not just the decline of a physical honors program, but also of the collegiate system as it currently exists, arguing that most learning and communication will eventually take place entirely online. On the other hand, one student speculated:

I believe the honors program will be one of the few programs on college campuses to not have converted entirely to online/digital administration. I believe it will maintain a physical presence on campus to be easily accessible to the students and assist in ways that a computer or website cannot.

Again, some respondents maintained that honors programs should be separate from the rest of the university. One commented:

I think honors programs will be mostly phased out for more condensed and streamlined higher education, or they

will become completely separate entities from their original universities, essentially “public Ivy League schools” so they can specifically focus on developing more gifted students.

Of course, no one can definitively say what will happen to honors housing in 30 or 100 years, yet these honors students’ ideas reveal what is most important to them about their honors programs. Although respondents disagreed on several points, the overall trends in their answers are important to note: honors programs need to have more space, utilize better technology, and be more environmentally friendly. Perhaps these answers seem unimaginative and disappointing. After all, when asked to dream big, most students did not dare to dream bigger than greener living and faster Internet, both of which are currently feasible. The students made no mention of futuristic, cutting-edge technology, and few students envisioned architectural spaces dramatically different from those of the present day.

The goal of this survey was to allow students to envision the possibilities of ideal honors accommodations, but the students, by and large, failed to produce interesting or imaginative responses. One explanation for their lack of imagination is tunnel vision: honors students are frequently insulated within their honors program or honors college or consumed by their academic work. Conferences may be an important opportunity for students to observe what honors students from around the country are doing and the way other honors programs are run and how they are housed. Thus honors administrators and faculty should encourage their students to take advantage of the many perspectives offered at conferences. The student voice is important, but an informed student voice is even better. Regardless of how informed honors students are, however, for many the most important aspect of their honors program is the community it engenders. Structures have the ability to shape these communities. Every honors program should carefully consider its mission and vision when designing the spaces that house honors, for, ultimately, these spaces will affect the overall atmosphere of the program and define its future.

